

Title: Kalashnikov and cooking-spoon: neo-Nazism, veganism and lifestyle cooking shows on YouTube

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Abstract:

Food consumption has always been a deeply symbolic, identity-related issue. But contrary to the intuitive assumption which links meat-free diets to peace-loving, left-leaning actors and ideologies, this article illustrates how a group of (German) neo-Nazis, *Balacclava Küche* (*Balacclava Kitchen*), appropriates vegan diet in their YouTube cooking videos. Analysing these videos, supported by an interview with the group, we inquire into the various ways in which cooking and food consumption are intertwined with their (everyday) politics. We close the article by putting their attitude into a wider perspective, suggesting an ideal-typical model of how links between culture, nature and identity can be understood.

Keywords:

Autonome Nationalisten (*autonomous nationalists*), *Balacclava Küche*, culture and nature, extreme right, social media, food, vegetarianism

1. Introduction

Food consumption has been not only a matter of necessity, but a deeply symbolic issue (Barthes 1961; Douglas 1966; Sahlins 1990; Simmel 1997; Eder 2009). As a socio-cultural activity, eating has a fundamental role in how nature is appropriated and in establishing social relations. It is thus also a major anchor point for defining individual and collective identities (Fischler 1988; Scholliers 2001). A meat-free diet has been a significant aspect of such boundary work; of attempts to purify (symbolically) both individual bodies and entire communities. Today, vegetarianism and veganism, as these diets are commonly called in the West, are not only connected to ethical and health concerns, as well as reflections of tradition, but also express individual lifestyles. Stereotypically, they suggest a left-wing, peace-loving and counter-cultural attitude in opposition to, supposedly, power-hungry meat-eaters. Meat-free diets and concern for the environment in general have, however, historically also been connected to the political right. The early conservationist and organic food movements in many Western countries shared conservative motivations (for example Ditt 1996 and Reed 2001 with regard to the United Kingdom) while parts of the German *völkisch* movement, emerging in the 1870s (Mosse 1966;

Hartung 1996), linked a healthy diet and vegetarianism to anti-Semitism, 'race' and Social-Darwinism (for example Förster 1882; cf. also contributions in Puschner et al. 1996).

During the current re-emergence of the far right in many European countries, historic extreme right wing meanings associated with environmental protection (Forchtner and Kølvråa 2015; Forchtner 2016) and even with diets have resurfaced in forms that are characteristic of contemporary popular culture, where food is more often than not represented as an object of entertainment. In such a context, the former *British National Party's* chairman Nick Griffin found the cooking business an appropriate venue from which to address voters increasingly used to seeing politicians talking from the position of 'ordinary' person, who cooks and talks like one of 'us' (Griffin 2013).¹ In Germany, a self-styled 'national-socialist vegan cooking crew' (Balaclava Küche 2014), *Balaclava Küche (Balaclava Kitchen)*, emerged recently, addressing its audience through amateur cooking videos posted on YouTube. Drawing on the popular genre of TV-cooking shows, their shows are an exemplary case of the modernisation of the (German-speaking) neo-Nazi scene, and are examined in this paper. *Balaclava Küche* certainly contradicts stereotypical images of neo-Nazis and have thus been the object of national and international media coverage since 2014. Their videos feature young men (and one woman) wearing balaclavas and cooking everyday vegan dishes while enjoying themselves and their politics. According to an interview that they gave to a Russian extreme right group (Greenline Front 2015), the German group consists of five vegans and a few assistants (both vegans and vegetarians) who view their food consumption as a 'moral choice' that is ecological, healthy and stays true to 'the National Socialist ideology'.

Against this background of performing extreme right lifestyles and ideology through cooking, we raise two sets of questions, one more empirical, the other more conceptual and theoretical.

First and empirically oriented, our main focus in this article is the link between political positions and food. We do so by asking how the group's extreme right message is conveyed via the popular mainstream genre of cooking shows, and through instructional YouTube videos on cooking vegan food. How does such lifestyle broadcasting create and strengthen a particular community, and exclude others, by drawing not on traditional extreme right positions, but on food-related lifestyle? How do the group's ideas resurface through cooking instruction and the selection of foods and recipes? The relevance of

¹ While we do not need to go into the details of Griffin's stew, it is interesting to note that also in his case, cookery and politics are not neatly separated.

these questions is not primarily due to *Balaclava Küche* actual influence (for example, their Facebook page is liked by about 2500 people at the end of 2015 and their offline activism focuses on the scene). Instead, the significance of this empirical analysis lies in the fact that the crew is a paradigmatic case of a 'new' extreme right which goes beyond stereotypical expectations (Forchtner and Kølvrå forthcoming 2017). By contradicting commonly held assumptions of how the extreme right (or at least parts of it) acts, this study offers insights into a (post-)modernising scene which has appropriated (life)styles not previously associated with the extreme right. Furthermore, the relevance of investigating *Balaclava Küche* lies in the explicit re-emergence of traditional extreme right concerns for nutrition, food and the environment represented by the group – a re-emergence which is not restricted to online activism but affects offline practices (see below).

Second, we view the case of *Balaclava Küche* as being relevant for environment and food studies in that it opens up venues to engage with conceptual and theoretical questions concerning the relation between 'culture' and 'nature'. In other words: the counterintuitive case of vegan neo-Nazis provokes us to think about common ways in which the also symbolic practice of eating is linked to the reproduction of groups, and their relation to nature. Thus, our second set of questions attempts to offer a preliminary consideration of the intersection of these particular food-practices and deep cultural structures. Here, we draw on the work of sociologist Klaus Eder (2009), who, in line with a long tradition in social thought cited at the beginning of this article, views food consumption as the key site for the reproduction of the social. As we discuss in greater detail at the end of our article, Eder claims that societal practices (in this case, those transmitted via social media) are based on two cultural structures: the bloody, carnivorous tradition of community-building versus the non-bloody, vegetarian tradition. The former, Eder argues, reproduces inequality and the domination of inner and outer nature. In contrast, the vegetarian tradition forms the cultural basis for counter-movements, enabling understanding and reconciliation with nature. Although Eder is well aware that this dichotomy is an ideal typical one, existing research and the evidence gathered in this paper suggests to us that we need to differentiate further, going beyond the dichotomy of good, communicative vegans and vegetarians versus bad, power-hungry meat-eaters. Our case study is thus also supposed to contribute to the development of a conceptual framework through which practices of food consumption and, more generally, the relationship between 'culture' and 'nature' can be better understood. Although primarily concerned with *Balaclava Küche*, we thus view our study as a springboard from which to propose a refined conceptualisation of the relationship between culture, nature and identity.

We answer these questions by focusing first and foremost on eight currently available videos on the YouTube channel *Balacalava Küche*. With the exception of the last one, they were all uploaded in 2014 and together contain approximately five hours of material. As we cannot discuss all these episodes in detail here, Table 1 is intended to provide readers with rudimentary information, ranging from video-length and the number of views to dishes prepared and ingredients. Each video was coded according to a dynamically evolving code-list. The variables derived from theoretical considerations but were adjusted over the course of the analysis. This resulted in continuous updating and re-coding of the analysed material. These variables were then aggregated into six dimensions. The first three concern actual cooking: ‘cooking advice and the inability to cook’; ‘fooling around’ – what *Balacalava Küche* calls ‘chatting rubbish’ (Greenline Front 2015); and issues to do with, in a narrow sense, ‘lifestyle’. In contrast, dimensions four to six (‘Holocaust and NS-references’, ‘gender and homophobia’ and ‘other political allusions, including anti-Semitism and racism’) capture the politics of exclusion by focusing on traditional topics of the extreme right. In addition, we draw on a three-hour-long interview with three members of the crew (conducted on April 13, 2015), as well as looking at their Facebook and vk.com profiles.²

	Length	Views (Sep 18, 2015)	Food prepared in the video	Ingredients
Video 1	55:37	27,515 since February 18, 2014	Brainless lettuce... without lettuce; autonomous tofu with pan; metro metro apple-stuff	Pepper, carrot, cucumber, corn, salad, walnut, tofu (smoked or basil), mild rapeseed oil, balsamic vinegar; onions, garlic, tofu (natural), leaf spinach, yeast, champignon mushroom, mild rapeseed oil, turmeric, pepperoni, salt, pepper; apples, oat flakes, oat milk, walnut oil, agave syrup, cinnamon, pecan nuts

² We are thankful to the members of *Balacalava Küche* for answering our questions in much detail. Whenever we quote from this interview, we indicate this through an ‘*’.

Video 2	49:27	16,647 since April 9, 2014	Browned aubergine, 'Rande Öpke' potatoes stuffed with a lot of white stuff; New Swabia cheesecake	Onions, garlic, aubergines, dried tomatoes, olives, couscous, potatoes, garlic, soy flour, soy milk, soy cream, bread crumbs, water; margarine, flour, baking powder, sugar, lemon, tofu (natural and silken) cornflower, raspberries
Rosa, Pink, Lila oder Luxemburg	00:13	9,127 since April 25, 2014	A short, anti-communist song which makes fun of the killing of the communist politician Rosa Luxemburg by extreme right militias in 1919. The video features four members of the crew singing and laughing while one plays the guitar.	
Video 3	01:09:04	20,685 since May 16, 2014	Vegetable-sticks with a dip; potato-wedges and rissoles; Kaiserschmarrn	Peppers, cucumber, carrots, potatoes, olive oil, sesame seeds; red onions, garlic, kidney beans, oat flakes, pine nuts, parsley, sea salt, pepper, basil, carob bean gum, cinnamon, mustard, olive oil; sugar, flour, soya flour, soya- vanilla drink, baking powder, vanilla, applesauce
Video 4	01:02:28	11,913 since July 10, 2014	Soy Vanilla yogurt with kiwi and banana; pasta-salad; chocolate cake	soy-yogurt (vanilla flavour), kiwis and bananas; pasta, tofu (basil), paprika, peas, gherkins, vegan whipping cream, vegan mayonnaise; flour, sugar, vegan whipping cream (plus stabilizer), backing powder, bananas, vanilla sugar, cacao, sunflower oil, lemon, salt
Video 5 - Kurzsend- ung#1	21:50	3,981 since September	Pasta bake	vegan cheese, leek, soy whipping cream, flour, vegetable soup, pasta, tofu (smoked)

		19, 2014		
Video 5 – outtakes	02:15	2,883 since September 27, 2014	See video 5 below	See video 5 below
Video 5	31:47	9,201 since June 16, 2015	Four spreads (vegan mett, sunflower-cress spread, pea- spread, chickpea-tomato spread)	rice cakes, tomato purée, onions, water, salt, pepper; sunflower seeds, cress, lemon, salt, pepper; peas, pine nuts, onions, olive oil, fresh mint, salt, pepper; chickpeas, tomato purée, olive oil, water, fresh herbs, salt, pepper

Table 1: The data

In the following section, we outline the development of extreme right actors in Germany since the 19th century, in particular with regard to the role of vegetarianism and veganism. In section three, we turn to literature on cooking as a lifestyle practice, and on the role of social media in the dissemination of messages today. Section four analyses the actual performances in these vegan cooking shows on YouTube. The conclusion returns to the aforementioned limits of the intuitive link between a meat-free diet and the political left. Drawing on Eder's work, we propose a more complex conceptual apparatus which captures both issues of food consumption and the wider relation between culture and nature.

2. Meat-free (neo-)Nazis and lifestyle on YouTube

2.1 The (meat-free) extreme right in Germany since the 19th century

The history of the environmental movement, especially in Germany, illustrates that environmental concerns and a meat-free diet can develop, though by no means necessarily, in close proximity to the *völkisch* movement. While concerns for nature and landscape already characterised the romantic movement, with its holistic understanding of nature, organised attempts to protect the latter in Germany first surfaced during industrialisation in the 19th century (Riordan 1997). Significant parts of this

movement to protect the homeland (*Heimatschutz*) have long been described as elitist, conservative and even reactionary (Wolschke-Bulmahns 1996). Some of them, indeed, joined National Socialist nature-protection institutions (Brüggemeier et al. 2005, Uekötter 2006). Another relevant force was the German Life Reform movement, itself a lifestyle movement, which aimed for a return to and reconciliation with nature. These desires manifested themselves in resentment vis-à-vis the industrial city and in the affirmation of nudism, sexual liberation, alternative medicine and organic and vegetarian food. Although Life Reform ideas were not *völkisch* per se, back-to-nature ideas were present in the *völkisch* movement as well, which also viewed the countryside as a non-polluted space for national renewal. In consequence, not only anarchist, communist and religious communes, but also *völkisch* ones, were established in the countryside – some of which were indeed oriented towards a vegetarian lifestyle (Linse 1983: 40, 188-220). This illustrates that a meatless diet has a politically promiscuous history, ranging from the left to the right. While we do not suggest any necessary link between such a diet (or an environmentalist stance) and the extreme right, we do stress this connection in the context of this article. For example, the well-known *Vegetarische Obstbaukolonie Eden*, founded in 1893, was characterised by a history of *völkisch* thought, long before Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. The *völkisch* foundation of such enterprises is strikingly visible in texts such as *Der Vegetarismus als Theil der socialen Frage* (*Vegetarianism as part of the social question*) by Bernhard Förster (1882: 19), in which he argued for a vegetarian life-style which would free up the strengths of the German *Volks* and enable workers to confront 'despicable [schnöde] capitalism and speculation [Börsianismus]'. Similarly, Richard Wagner (1880, 1881), who had a strong influence on Hitler, identified the cause of the physical and moral degeneration of the human race in the shift from a meat-free to a meat-containing diet.

Due to fears of being dependent on food-imports, based on the memory of severe shortages after World War I, food became a primary concern as the Nazis assumed power in 1933.³ Indeed, while National Socialist dietary advices and policies primarily aimed for food autarky, diet was also linked to 'racial' concerns (Melzer 2003: 165). Food furthermore became a 'key avenue through which to push the Nazi message' concerning the nazification of the German diaspora in Australia as Emily Turner-Graham (2006: 127) argues. These concerns, however, did not necessarily include a meat-free diet but rather aimed, more realistically, at reducing meat consumption. Though vegan and vegetarian diets were thus not generally promoted, leading Nazis such as Rudolf Hess and Adolf Hitler were vegetarians. Hitler (2000:

³ Tellingly, the leader of the Nazi-era *Nazi Women's League*, Gertrud Scholtz-Klink (cited in: Wistrich 1995: 228), said in 1937: 'even if our weapon is only the wooden spoon, its striking power shall be no less than other weapons.'

114) himself reportedly commented on his preference for vegetarianism and raw vegetarian food in 1941 as he linked the strength of Caesar's soldiers to their allegedly vegetarian diet. He made similar claims in 1942 regarding Japanese wrestlers, whom he considered 'amongst the strongest men in the world' (ibid: 231). If meat-free diets may not have been generally favoured by the Nazis, a natural diet that focused on the purity of food was. (On the anthroposophist method of organic farming, see Treitel 2009. This method augured the return of a balanced relationship; a regenerated community living in harmony with nature.)

After 1945 the German extreme right fragmented, until the *National Democratic Party* (NPD) was founded in 1964. Although initially successful, the NPD lost steam in the late 1960s and remained in decline until 1996, when Udo Voigt took the NPD party chair.⁴ He opened the party to non-party affiliated, neo-Nazi elements - the loosely organised, so called *Kameradschaften* (Comradships) - and switched the party's focus to social policies, including a strident anti-globalisation message. Within these non-affiliated actors, the *Autonome Nationalisten* (Autonomous Nationalists, AN) have emerged in the 2000s, adopting styles and slogans traditionally associated with the radical left (Schedler and Häusler 2011; Schlembach 2013), and thereby leaving behind rigid lifestyle-codes stereotypically associated with the extreme right. Indeed, partly due to the dissemination of the AN (the sub cultural, extreme right trend from which *Balaclava Küche* emerges), present-day extreme right views on environment and diet are often close to positions found in contemporary Green movements and foodie magazines.

Umwelt & Aktiv (*Environment & Active*), an extreme right, ecologically oriented publication in Germany with close links to the NPD, describes itself as 'The magazine for holistic thinking. Environmental protection, animal protection, homeland protection'. It is published four times a year and includes articles on, for example, nuclear energy and genetically modified organisms, as well as gardening and (traditional) handicraft. The magazine does also give attention to the effects of meat production and consumption on the environment, claiming that it not only causes the suffering of animals, but is also unsustainable and contributes to global warming. In contrast, a meat-free diet is shown as having a far less detrimental effect on the environment and improve individual health (Umwelt & Aktiv 2012: 19). *Umwelt & Aktiv* (2011: 22) also presents a critique of the fact that the food system 'remains hidden behind the counters of supermarkets or the unbearable TV cooking shows where meat still features as

⁴ Although studies of the NPD in the 20th century have, to our knowledge, not focused on diet, early party programmes already featured agriculture as an issue of autarky, and recent materials include extensive sections on, for example, the dangers of genetically modified organisms and the benefits of organic farming.

one of the central parts of the meal'. Similarly, in the previously-mentioned interview with Greenline Front, *Balacava Küche* criticises 'German nationalists' for not being interested in the vegan (or vegetarian) cause, or in the fight for animal rights.⁵

2.2 Cooking and lifestyle on YouTube

The modernisation of the extreme right is not concerned only with the content of the message, but also with the form in which it is conveyed. In its format, *Balacava Küche* differs little from numerous food-related television programmes that have proliferated in Western (but also Eastern) Europe since the 1990s, especially in its seeming informality, domestic settings and conversational style of language.⁶ However, unlike professionally-made cooking material available on Youtube, such as Jamie Oliver's FoodTube, for example, they are not spin-offs of the television content, created to maximise profit.

TV cooking, nowadays best represented through channels such as *Food Network*, has spread across the world thanks to the global reach of the contemporary media. In particular, formats from English-speaking countries fill a considerable amount of television time reserved for education and, increasingly, entertainment. While these shows offer material for the improvement of one's kitchen performance and are sometimes even used as beginner's cooking instruction (de Solier 2013), many commentators agree that they are mostly concerned with the promotion of class-related lifestyles and other identities (see Ashley et al. 2004: 171). Thus, alongside the introduction of recipes and cooking techniques, food television promotes possible ways of being; as audiences watch, they buy into styles of living: we learn how and what to cook, how to live and, mostly, how to think about food (Ketchum 2005). As food becomes seen as a marker of what we would like to be, a symbol of our identity and therefore a vehicle for a desirable – if not necessarily actual – social image, it is Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction that

⁵ There is an interesting link between the post-war extreme right's ideas and Hindu Aryanism; a link popularised by Savitri Devi, a 'leading light of the international neo-Nazi underground from the 1960's onwards' (Goodrick-Clarke 1998: 6). Devi was a European convert to Hinduism who not only admired the Aryan myth but also National Socialism. Through the promotion of her ideas extreme right positions, Eastern religion, Green ideas, vegetarianism and biocentrism were connected, and able to influence the New Age movement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, an article in the German magazine *Umwelt & Aktiv* (Böthe 2010), founded in 2007 and closely linked to the NDP, thus celebrated Devi's 'radical environmental ethics' in a review of one of her books.

⁶ Although instruction in cooking started to be broadcast on TV almost at the beginning of the medium itself - in Britain, where one of the earliest such shows was broadcast, Phillip Harben already cooked on television between 1946 and 1951 (Collins 2009; Tominc 2015 for early Slovene shows in the context of socialism) - many commentators agree that the 1990s in particular saw significant change in how the instruction was communicated. In Germany, cooking shows have also become increasingly popular, featuring different types of personalities and cooking styles represented by chefs such as Horst Lichter and Alfons Schuhbecks, Christian Rach and Steffen Henssler, as well as Tim Mälzer and Ralf Zacherl.

provides a useful tool for understanding how such shows offer the viewer cultural and, more specifically, culinary capital (Naccarato and LeBesco 2012). Through watching TV cookery, the audience acquires specific knowledge about food and the surrounding practices which, while linking them to a specific class, also distinguish them from other classes: it is therefore possible to be/perform “middle class” identity by demonstrating specific culinary knowledge deemed desirable by others in the same group.

Such television is often related to the performance of the so-called ‘foodie identities’, recently discussed by Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann (2014) in their analysis of foodie discourse and the particular lexis of this community. Foodies’ consumption and lifestyle rely heavily, for example, on key notions such as ‘local’, ‘organic’ and ‘fair trade’. It is through these ideals that distinction and identity is created, as these ‘gourmands’ strive for a more ethical pattern of consumption (Greene 2015: 53; also Rousseau 2012). At the same time, the ‘feel good’ effect of perceiving oneself as ‘a (morally) good person’ (an attitude from which members of *Balaclava Küche*, however, distance themselves*) is supplemented by a general tendency of the food media to offer pleasure (Greene 2015). Others such as Pauline Adema (2000) have pointed towards this aspect of food in many ways paralleling sexual desire, as we may limitlessly and without any consequence fantasise about the taste, smell and feel of the food represented.

If cooking shows offer possibilities of being, *Balaclava Küche* clearly follows the contemporary genre’s format. Indeed, a vast number of studies on internet use by the extreme right exist (for example Hale 2012, Atton 2006, Caiani and Parenti 2009, 2011, De Koster and Houman 2008), including the use of social media in relation to the (re)production of their communities and, especially, in relation to their lifestyles (see Ekman 2014; Peters 2015. See also Daniels 2012 review which stresses the aspect of community and identity). It is in this context of (re)producing communities that we turn to YouTube – the latter signifying how consumers of the media turn into participants in a new media ecology, where the means of symbolic production are no longer monopolised by a few private or state-run media outlets. Indeed, the two cooks of *Balaclava Küche* truly perform ‘being cooks’ in a private setting, a relatively spacious kitchen in an attic flat (Image 1). Their logo in the bottom left corner of the videos features two men in balaclavas, each holding an AK-47 (Kalashnikov). While one weapon is original, however, the top of the other is remodelled as a cooking utensil (a turner). Apart from their wearing of balaclavas, the cooks wear informal clothing, and prepare utensils and ingredients for cooking in

advance, showing each of them to the audience as they read out the list of ingredients ('Zutaten') on the screen.

IMAGE 1 HERE

Image 1: The first episode of *Balaclava Küche*. The list of ingredients includes: onions, garlic, tofu, spinach leaves, yeast, mushrooms and mild rapeseed oil, turmeric, salt and pepper. Image courtesy of the *Balaclava Küche*.

Clothes and other visible symbolic markers aside, their very first dish (a simple salad consisting of various vegetables cut in chunks, including peppers, carrots, cucumbers, corn, walnuts and tofu, see Image 2) already shows close parallels with the life-styling aspect of common TV food shows. At the end of the broadcast, the cooks style the food on the plate by carefully adding balsamic vinegar to the salad. What springs to mind are links to contemporary discourses on health (e.g. using vegan foods such as tofu, preparing food such as salad, which is considered healthy, and using rapeseed oil, which is also seen as 'healthier'), as well as to the Mediterranean/Italian diet (e.g. using balsamic vinegar). *Balaclava Küche* might, however, not only draw on this discourse but, like food TV shows where the audience acquire culinary capital which is closely associated with class identities, similarly demonstrate cultural capital commonly associated with the middle classes (e.g. by using the aforementioned balsamic vinegar). Indeed, their food suggestions often go beyond 'typical German cuisine' (and ingredients, see Table 1), though their food preparation techniques are basic, as is their knowledge of ingredients (as they proudly acknowledge). This is mixed with a spontaneous approach in which they decide what to cook only shortly before shooting the videos*.

IMAGE 2 HERE

Image 2: Presentation of the 'Brainless lettuce... without lettuce' finishes with a fancy addition of balsamic vinegar. Image courtesy of the *Balaclava Küche*.

Recording techniques and engagement with their audience aside, *Balaclava Küche's* format is that of a cooking show that could easily feature on television screens, were it not for its overall extreme right message. Without the emergence of social media platforms such as YouTube, such amateur videos would have never been available to global audiences, as there is little doubt that the 'gatekeeping mechanism of the old media' (Burgess and Green 2009: 24) – and especially of public television – would have censored the broadcasting of such shows. With the emergence of Web 2.0, however, such

limitation of access is no longer possible: as social media provide everyone (who has the requisite knowledge and material resources) with ‘the power to tell their own stories’ (Strangelove 2010: 9, see also Rousseau 2012: 39), previously unimaginable opportunities for the promotion of extreme right messages have been facilitated, as has a more direct way of engaging the audience.

Viewers who criticise or ridicule *Balaclava Küche*’s presenters for not being particularly sophisticated cooks miss the point of the crew’s exercise. As *Balaclava Küche* likes to stress, they cook how they like, making it a fun activity. When they (Balaclava Küche 2015) state that they are ‘cooking without meat and know-how!’, they speak of a lack of explicit knowledge while, at the same time, their DIY attitude attempts to speak to the audience, motivating them to *just do it*. Instead of the display of cooking skills, it is the playful nature of their attempts to educate and to steer debate, going hand in hand with their entertaining of the audience – the two cooks provide banter, tell stories and jokes and have fun amongst themselves – which makes these videos interesting to watch.

It is the nature of the medium which allows such informal efforts, and enables closer relationships with the audience via direct comments. As such, it is clear that for *Balaclava Küche*, creating and sharing these videos not only illustrates, as Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009: 26) maintain, a ‘desire to broadcast the self’, but also serves as a social networking activity. While they are performing for their cause, the medium thus also opens up the opportunity to address the crew directly via YouTube comments. ‘It is such conversational character’ writes Patricia Lange (2007, in Burgess and Green 2009), that distinguishes the new from the traditional media. At the same time, it also allows voices of opposition. Many of their followers and opponents use this function; roughly half of the comments are criticising or, more often, ridiculing the format, while the other half defends the format or shows serious interest. A few criticise or ridicule the crew’s cooking for the use of ingredients that are not usually considered ‘German’ and, consequently, for their alleged hypocrisy.⁷ Some confess to like it, as one commentator says, ‘except for the couscous’ *Balaclava Küche* use in one dish. Others disapprove or are simply disgusted by their activity; ‘Liberty Languages’ (Image 3), protests against their videos by claiming a misuse of the vegan ideology. Some comments concern music played in the background while others point to some of the foodstuffs used in the show, such as Provamel. In their playfulness, *Balaclava Küche* are not particularly upset by such criticism. Instead, their replies to such liberal and/or left-wing critics

⁷ For example, this is the case with regard to tofu, though not many know that the soybean has a National Socialist past, since the Nazis favoured soybeans in the 1930s in order to help make the country autarkic (Melzer 2003: 156f; according to Proctor (1999: 4) soybeans were even called ‘Nazi beans’).

range from witty to ironic, thus laying bare a certain helplessness of these critics in the face of this kind of modernised extreme right.

IMAGE 3 HERE

Image 3: An example of a conversation between *Balaclava Küche* and their audience. Image courtesy of the *Balaclava Küche*.

Engaging with their audience and thereby mobilising some of those watching their videos for the ‘right cause’ goes beyond such interaction. Given the positive response inside the scene, they plan a *Balaclava Party* as a way ‘to participate in the life of people’, and to express themselves in real life. Similarly, they provided vegan catering for a large, extreme right concert (‘Live H8 III - Days of Reckoning’) which took place in May 2015 and which was celebrated as a success by them and others on their Facebook page. *Balaclava Küche* furthermore announced a raffle on their Facebook page, promising that the winners would take part in one of their future episodes, and receive both an audio CD by the extreme right singer-songwriter *Jugendgedanken*, literally: Youth-thoughts (who happens to lead *Balaclava Küche*) and a box of stickers. All in all, they view their intervention into the extreme right as very successful, and as very well received*.

4. Analysing food, analysing politics

4.1 Neo-Nazi ideology in a YouTube cooking show

Let us start this section by examining rather common, not exclusively food-related, extreme right references which appear throughout the videos. Some of the signs used, take up and/or adopt existing idioms which have been employed by extreme right groups. For example, the crew speaks of ‘Trick 18’, deriving from the common German idiom ‘Trick 17’, which refers to ways of solving a problem. Replacing 17 with 18, however, presumably signifies ‘Adolf Hitler’, his initials being the first and eighth letters in the alphabet (A. H.). The reference to such codes is a recurring feature in *Balaclava Küche*: for example, ‘88’ suggests a double H (‘Heil Hitler’), while ‘444’ (the fourth letter in the alphabet, three times – DDD) means ‘Deutschland den Deutschen’ (‘Germany for the Germans’). These codes are almost banal symbols of neo-Nazism, and *Balaclava Küche*’s ‘belonging to the tribe’ is also explicitly presented when, for example, they call for solidarity with three recently forbidden neo-Nazi groups.

Another salient way in which the group signals their political belonging is their clothing. In addition to balaclavas, which presumably signify militancy and are intended to serve as a trademark while circuiting the perils of showmanship*, the men display various T-shirts with politically charged imprints. In the first video, the two cooks wear T-shirts bearing what seems to be an image of Hitler and the sentence 'One human being is illegal' ('Ein Mensch ist illegal').⁸ Moreover, the sentence twists an anti-racist slogan 'No human being is illegal' ('Kein Mensch ist illegal'), which opposes the criminalisation of non-resident (i.e. 'illegal') immigrants, by dropping the 'k' from the German word 'kein' (turning 'no' into 'one').

Although these references do not draw on food as a carrier of meaning, they are in most cases embedded in the process of cooking and part of a food narrative. A radical example is given in video #4, in which the cooking crew tattoos one of their members' blood group on the inside of the latter's upper arm (Image 4). This practice, which was used by parts of the SS, is accompanied by jokes about the numerical tattoos which were a part of imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps. While this speaks to their core audience, the faded-in text seen in German at the bottom of Image 4, reads 'He tattoos even worse than he cooks pasta...'. This does not just establish an intertextual reference to a previous incident in which the tattooist threw pasta into a cooking pot filled with cold water, but also gives a good impression of the unexpectedly self-ironic stance often adopted by the members of the crew. Whatever the intended purpose of this attitude might be, it illustrates the group's belonging to a new generation of extreme-right activists, different from stereotypical images.

IMAGE 4 HERE

Image 4: Episode 4 includes a lifestyle activity: tattooing a member of the crew. Image courtesy of the *Balaclava Küche*.

Such links between the crew's cooking and its ideology are explicitly expressed in various other scenes and comments. One of their T-shirts carries the slogan 'Gerade Kante... Ohne Drogen, Kippen und Alk' ('Straight edge. No drugs, cigarettes and alcohol', Image 7), and indeed, the three members of the crew who took part in the interview are all largely following a straight edge lifestyle*. Given that straight edge is not necessarily associated with the extreme right, this serves as an example of the group's

⁸ It would, however, be mistaken to assume that this historical figure serves as a motivation for their choice of diet, which is a suggestion that they ridiculed during the interview. Instead, they are driven by concerns for health, and by a rejection of agro-business (as well as, partly, by compassion for animals).*

appropriation of lifestyles not stereotypically linked to their ideology. Again this is not, however, a phenomenon restricted to *Balaclava Küche*. Although *Balaclava Küche* might be a paradigmatic example of extreme right modernisation, this tendency has been visible at least (but, arguably, especially) since the emergence of the aforementioned *Autonome Nationalisten* in the early 2000s.

For neo-Nazis such as the members of *Balaclava Küche*, sensory characteristics of food and the cooking process provide space for various comments. Visual characteristics such as colour and size are one example. Preparing a dish involving tofu, one of the cooks gives advice related to frying it for longer, and the other replies to this suggestion of browning the food by saying that ‘white is always good’, thus referring to the natural whiteness of the un-fried tofu but also, at the same time, conveying another message. It should be made clear that comments like this one (see also below) are not presented in an entirely serious manner, but are embedded in a more or less playful framework. *Balaclava Küche* know that their political position in contemporary society is at a low point and, as their leading member puts it, ‘can only move forward [laughing], further down is not possible, we can ridicule everything, we have a sort of carnival licence’ [Narrenfreiheit]*. Against this background, selecting vegetables by size becomes an opportunity to comment on the value of natural selection, from a Social-Darwinist perspective (Image 5): only bigger peppers should be used in cooking, and the small ones should be left out. Or, as they say: ‘[o]bviously, we do not want the little crap [Pissdinger]’. As well as the colour and size of ingredients, the noise produced during the cooking process can be another opportunity for the expression of their political views. Commenting on the sound of food being stirred in a pan, ‘white stuff’ or mustard, they repeat on several occasions that ‘this is what sex by blacks sounds like’.

IMAGE 5 HERE

Image 5: Preparing peperoni in video #1. Image courtesy of the *Balaclava Küche*.

Similarly, the two cooks talk about their goal of six million Facebook likes and what they will do as soon as this mark is reached (such as cutting off one’s finger). The meaning of the number is not too opaque (about six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust) – though they explicitly refer the audience to history teachers in case they should not understand it. In another case, they communicate the number while crushing nuts which they plan to use for one of their dishes. It is here that one of the two cooks comments casually: ‘these are never six million nuts’ (thus alluding to the denial of the killing of six million Jews). In yet another scene, when preparing the pasta bake, the number re-appears.

A: Ok, add it [the soup]. We now have eem eem, let me lie [

B: [six million

A: [eee we have taken half a litre,
eem half a litre liquid (...)

Food and its preparation are also used to attack the crew's political opponents. For example, pointing to their oven has become a recurring theme in their cooking shows (not only because of possible references to the Holocaust), in order to attack the journalist Anna Röpke who has, for years, reported critically about the German extreme right. In the vein of creative names for dishes, a potato dish is named after her ('Randeä Öpke'). Besides general banter in which they guess at her culinary preferences (they say that she would anyway not like their 'vegan shit-cuisine'), the oven is presented as a gate to Narnia (referring to the *The Chronicles of Narnia* series of novels/films); a place, according to *Balaclava Küche*, where her 'children hide from the youth welfare service' (if, indeed, they do not hide in a 'dustbin'). Besides such statements, they also express, however, more straightforward, negative characterisations of Röpke and thus, the kitchen becomes a political space with particular affordances for articulating anti-left politics vis-à-vis both an extreme right audience, as well as the left.

4.2 Neo-Nazism and food: lifestyle in the contemporary food system

One of the major concerns of the present-day extreme right, which generally aligns them with foodies, is their opposition towards globalisation, be it cultural, economic or political (Mudde 2007: 184-197), and it is not surprising that *Balaclava Küche* takes this aspect up as well. With regards to food, the group's opposition is directed against multinational companies. Although they do not give an extensive justification, their wider argument seems to mirror mainstream and social sciences literature on the issue: the foods produced by multinational companies, such as Coca-Cola™ and Nestle™, form part of an unjust food system which is often ecologically insensitive and squeezes smaller – especially local and regional – players out, thereby giving the multinationals unprecedented power over the nutrition of entire (nation-)states. (One example of this aspect of their activism is that in 2014 the group shared *March Against Monsanto* on their Facebook page.) This reality, in which (nation-)states may no longer be able to control their food systems, is certainly a crucial issue for the extreme right, stemming from their aim for an autarkic and sovereign nation, free of 'foreign' influence. The reasons for such opposition, however, do not come just from their wider attitudes towards the United States, neoliberal capitalism

and an assumed Jewish hegemony, all of which are matters of concern to *Balaclava Küche*. In one video, for example, the Balaclava crew complain about those who visit McDonalds, which is something true National Socialists – according to them – do not do. Within the extreme right, they are certainly not alone in this criticism; a criticism not only of McDonalds as a US-based multinational company but, most of all, as a symbol of standardisation and Americanisation (Ritzer 1993; see Sommer 2008 for more on the extreme right's opposition to globalisation). This is also visible in a 51-second video posted on Facebook, entitled 'Shenanigans [Schabernack] ;-) Criticism of capitalism this time different', which features two men in balaclavas who stamp on a burger.

Like activist celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver, who encourages consumers to vote with their forks, the crew posted an image on their Facebook page urging their audience to remember: 'Your receipt is a ballot paper - every bloody time'. While this might suggest a turn towards 'the neoliberal ethos of consumer solutions in order to fix the food system' (Broad 2012: 190), *Balaclava Küche* does not argue in favour of reformism. Instead, the only sustainable solution as they see it is linked to the radical overthrow of the current democratic order. In their eagerness to help their followers avoid using the products of companies which they view as problematic, the Balaclava crew has announced an app which will notify the consumer of the potential American or Israeli origin of a product. In addition, they urge their viewers – in a manner not dissimilar to the rhetoric of contemporary 'foodie' movements who subscribe to the new-left politics of local, organic and Fairtrade – to cook and eat quality food. This includes not just taking care when shopping for food (for example, to avoid products developed through testing on animals – hence arguing for the use of Soyare rather than Alpro Soya/Provamel), but also to avoid food waste: they encourage the audience to make use of supermarket waste (containering), as they do*, since this decreases environmental impact, and they also argue that one should not play with food.

At the same time, however, they do play both with food and amongst themselves, sometimes even throwing the former around (Image 5 and 6). Their kitchen, full of posters of 'politically incorrect' slogans and balaclava stickers, often becomes a playground where they 'fool around'. This is TV cooking *par-excellence* as it offers entertainment but, simultaneously, provides insight into the lives of a playful and certainly not boring National Socialist cooking crew: it most clearly promotes the style of being a young German neo-Nazi.

IMAGE 6 HERE

Image 6: Having fun. Image courtesy of the *Balaclava Küche*.

Just as their ideals concerning waste sometimes clash with their practices, so too does their actual use of ingredients sometimes display a departure from their core claims. While the crew is aware of problems related to foreign products, and thus favours 'local' and 'regional' ones, this does not always prove to be easy, especially in light of their veganism. For example, they object to the consumption of tropical fruits which are neither 'local' nor 'regional' but, at the same time, they use bananas and kiwis as these are, ultimately, to be favoured over meat.*

While Image 6 demonstrates their approval of bananas, it also speaks to another topic that deserves at least some attention. While issues of gender are not the central aspect of our analysis (though they reoccur in the videos), it is worth noting how male neo-Nazism is performed, especially since, as Julia Twigg (1983: 24, 27; see also Fiddes, 1991: 11) noted, in Europe meat has been traditionally linked to the male, rather than to the female gender. After all, like their lifestyling, the male identities of the members of the group seems to differ from traditional perceptions of extreme right masculinity, as visible in, for example, Mattias Ekman's (2014) study of extreme right YouTube videos in which men perform hyper-masculinity. Even if it may seem that eating vegan food may add to their masculine strength, since it suggests an individual's power to resist meat-eating (an argument not dissimilar to that of religious fasting), the crew is in fact not concerned with finding virtue in denying themselves meat, since they joyfully comment on the similarity in taste of bacon and tofu ('smoked tofu tastes like bacon').⁹

IMAGE 7 HERE

Image 7: Banana. Image courtesy of the *Balaclava Küche*.

We conclude this section with a comment on *Gemeinschaft* (community), a significant notion in *Balaclava Küche*'s discourse. In contrast to *Gesellschaft* (society), Ferdinand Tönnies (2002: 35) viewed *Gemeinschaft* as a form of social integration which is 'lasting and genuine', like a 'living organism', while *Gesellschaft* remains 'transitory and superficial', 'a mechanical aggregate'. Indeed, when asked to define the core of their convictions, their reply did not concern, for example, an anti-immigration stance

⁹ For the reasons of space and of a lack of clear data, a discussion of the relatively low occurrence of women in this video will be omitted. (This should, however, not suggest that the (post-)modernising extreme right views women as passive and solely responsible for reproduction, see Forchtner and Kølvrå forthcoming 2017.)

(something the radical right is commonly associated with). Instead, the crew articulated a desire for 'Volksgemeinschaft' (ethnic community). Referring explicitly to National Socialism, they rejected class division in favour of such a community in which everybody, depending on her or his abilities, finds her or his place within the wider whole.*

IMAGE 8 HERE

Image 8: Enjoying community and cooking with guests. Image courtesy of the *Balaclava Küche*.

5. Conclusion: identity at the culture-nature intersection

Where does this inquiry into vegan neo-Nazis and their YouTube use leave us? The analysis we have provided above answers our first set of questions concerning the communication of the group via the medium of food. As the extreme right message gets transmitted via the performance of food, foods are inscribed with meanings that serve as transmitters of the message. In this way, food is not only political in the sense that it links to established (and known) political/economic actors. Moreover, foodstuffs transmit political messages that are specifically inscribed for communication within a specific group.

This does not, however, answer our second concern, regarding how the contradiction of stereotypical assumptions about vegetarians/vegans might enrich conceptual and theoretical considerations. It is against this background that we move beyond the case of *Balaclava Küche* and close our analysis, by turning our empirical investigation of how the contemporary extreme right performs in a new media ecology into a study of the significance of cultural structures related to nature, (here via food,) for the reproduction of identities.

We have indicated this question of how culture, nature and identity relate to each other – the socialisation of nature – in the introduction. That is, to what extent is a meat-free diet, a cultural practice commonly associated with the (liberal) left, connected to what is stereotypically viewed as 'good' and 'progressive', and how might such a link be categorised and made meaningful in a wider theoretical framework? Thus, by looking at this set of questions, we ultimately aim to contribute conceptually and theoretically to the field of environmental and food studies.

Contributions to environmental and food studies along this line are, of course, in no way new (see, for example, Douglas and Wildavsky's (1982) grid-group model). Utilising the counterintuitive case of *Balacava Küche*, we join this debate by drawing on Eder's (2009) aforementioned work which focuses in particular on the connection between society, nature and food consumption. Drawing on Simmel's (1997: 135) remarks on the seeming banality of the meal which transcends 'the mere naturalism of eating' but points to elementary modes of socialization, Eder views food consumption as a key site of symbolic appropriation of nature. Indeed, it is a site through which a group's relation to nature can be reconstructed, a relation endowed with moral and aesthetic meaning. Following this line of thought, Eder illustrates three different ways of such an appropriation by means of case studies on food taboos in (a) classical Judaism, (b) the Jivaro of Brazil and (c) modern Western Europe.

The reason for his interest in this comparison and the third case in particular is a critical one concerned with our modern relation to nature at large, a relation characterised by a predominantly utilitarian interest, by a protestant, promethean spirit. Trying to understand this from a socio-cultural perspective, Eder's analysis attempts to lay bare the cultural reasons for this self-destructive relation as it can be reconstructed through an analysis of the basic practice, and symbolic meaning, of eating. Underlying these practices in modern Western Europe, and developing further Habermas' (1984) theory with its juxtaposition of instrumental/strategic, goal-oriented action versus communicative action oriented towards understanding, Eder (2009: 132-139) identifies two ideal typical socio-evolutionary options in the way nature is appropriated by culture through food consumption. The first is the carnivorous culture which centres around the symbolic practice of sacrifice. This culture, which lives in the medium of blood and meat, is a culture of power and oppression, an instrumental, utilitarian perspective ultimately facilitating the killing and domination of others and the rejection of difference.

The second option is the vegetarian culture which is built around understanding and consensus, around equality and the possibility of difference. This culture is found in traditional gathering communities free of domination, and, present-day negations of inequality permitting, in (industrial) class societies. It is a culture which, ultimately, imagines reconciliation with nature as peaceful and idyllic. These two cultures mix in empirical circumstances, but Eder's key point in speaking of two cultures is to conceptualise one relation to nature as being about domination (utilitarian/carnivorous) and another one running counter to this paradigm (communicative/vegetarian) – and to describe implications for societal bonds by

pointing to pre-reflexive practices such as eating, since modern society is reproduced ‘daily in culinary operations’ (Eder 2009: 138).

While this is not the place to review Eder’s wider theoretical claims, we view his thoughts concerning these two cultures as a productive starting point in order to consider the symbolic implication of meat-eating in general, and the performance of *Balaclava Küche* in particular, from a theoretical point of view. Indeed, we suggest going beyond Eder’s proposal, which postulates one axis with two endpoints representing two cultures within and through which groups reproduce: one being characterised by domination, oppression and power, and the other by understanding and reconciliation. In light of historical examples and our particular analysis, a strong theoretical link between a meat-free diet and progressive principles might, however, be difficult to maintain. Instead of working with one axis, as proposed by Eder (vegetarian - carnivorous), we thus suggest to transform this axis into a two-dimensional space (Figure 1).

FIG 1 HERE

Figure 1: Culture, nature and identity

The horizontal axis is concerned with a group’s relation to nature, whether expressing a desire to reconcile culture with nature by aligning the former with the latter (the stereotypical vegetarian/vegan end of the axis), or a desire to separate the two, which leads the way to domination and the manipulation of nature by humans (the stereotypical carnivorous option). This resembles Eder’s initial proposal; but radicalising Eder’s constructivism, we raise the following question: with what kind of nature are actors aiming to align themselves, and from what kind of nature do they want to be separated? We thus go beyond the initial model by rejecting not its general idea but rather the understanding of nature as being per se peaceful and harmonious. In consequence, we introduce a second, vertical axis concerned with different constructions of nature; that is, the kind of nature with which actors can reconcile or which actors can dominate. Culture can be aligned or reconciled with nature imagined as peaceful and harmonious (the romantic option), or imagined as violent and characterised by struggle (the Social Darwinist option).

Out of these two axes emerges a field of four ideal typical positions which are, on an empirical level, never ‘purely’ underlying the symbol reproduction of groups. Focusing on the left side of the figure in

this article, a vegetarian/vegan desire to align with a peaceful culture (the upper-left quadrant) is perhaps exemplified by some hippies of the 1960s. In contrast, a vegetarianism/veganism which aligns itself with an image of nature as a field of struggle appears to underlie, among other things, the performances of *Balaclava Küche*. After all, social Darwinism is both repeatedly depicted (however playfully) in their videos, and is also undoubtedly a formative influence on extreme right worldviews. Thus, even *Balaclava Küche*'s veganism, which strives for reconciliation with nature, leads them away from notions of links between society and nature which are stereotypically associated with the left, as the nature the group imagines is one of struggle and demarcation.

While we restrict ourselves to these two forms of socialising nature in this article, this conceptualisation offers two more positions. First, classical modernist-industrial positions adhere to the idea of nature as resisting human needs, and thus as something which needs to be mastered. This view, arguably, has led to major environmental catastrophes caused by a belief in the possibility of dominating nature, e.g. through technology (such as the case of the Aral Sea, or attempts to 'fix' nature through the engineering of genetically modified rice). Second, we identify what we call 'civilising enlightenment'. The latter denotes a more reflexive attitude towards (wo)men's metabolism with nature, viewing the latter not as something which simply needs to be mastered – while nevertheless retaining a belief in the particularities of humans and civilisation.

While this is not the place to elaborate on this model, it does provide both a more adequate framework for understanding the role of food consumption in the creation of social bonds, as well as a broader conceptual framework for understanding the relation between culture, nature and identity. In other words: this model offers a more differentiated perspective on how pre-reflexive, deeply symbolic practices such as eating might underlie social action. It thereby not only helps to situate neo-Nazi veganism, the case of *Balaclava Küche* we have introduced, but also puts the latter into a wider perspective by offering a conceptual apparatus for future research.

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